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Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph

Assistant Professor

Department of English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous),

Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, India

Email: annjeena@gmail.com

Around the World and Across Centuries with *Francis Itty Cora*

Abstract

T.D. Ramakrishnan is an Indian novelist who writes in Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, the south western coastal state of India. T.D Ramakrishnan shot to fame with his works *Francis Itty Cora*, *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* and *Alpha*. His works have received worldwide acclaim recently owing to its English translations. Needless to say, they are listed as bestsellers!! He has been endowed with the prestigious Vayalar Award and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award. T.D. Ramakrishnan's *Francis Itty Cora* unravels itself as a postmodern novel as it offers multiple discourses on a variety of topics as he takes the readers across centuries, continents and diverse realms of knowledge and thought. This paper focuses on the play of multiple spaces and time spans that emerge and re-emerge as the narrative unfolds the story of Francis Ittycora.

Key Words: Narratives, Postmodern, Francis Ittycora.

“Narrative is just a sequence which starts and moves inexorably to its end. To understand this is to understand the most important principle behind narrative” (Cobley 9). As the narrative progresses from the beginning to the end, it is impeded with some diversions, detours and digressions and the reader comes into play in between the beginning and the end. The ‘space’ possessed by the narrative in this movement and its relation to ‘time’ i.e. the spatial and temporal relations form a seminal part in our basic understanding of a narrative text. Time has always played an important role in theories of narrative since we consider stories as sequences of events. Theorists have put forward two basic temporalities of narrative which are generally referred to as ‘story’ and ‘discourse’. Here, ‘story’ refers to the sequence of events that can be identified from any narrative telling and ‘discourse’ refers to the act of writing the text and the act of reading that text. It is also certain that the temporal patterns set out within the fictional worlds will be set against the reader’s temporal experience of the text, initiated on memory and expectation. And the reader’s attempt at juxtaposing the two temporalities will play a crucial role in the effect of the text.

Genette recommends three main areas where temporal relationships between story and discourse can produce interesting effects: order (the order of events), duration (how long the events or scenes last), and frequency (how often an event occurs). The order in which events are presented in the text is very crucial since “our focus on whatever moment in the text we have reached will invariably be coloured by our memory of what has gone before and our anticipation of what is to come” (Bridgeman 57). The whole concept of narrative progression or the movement from a beginning point to a finishing point implies the existence of a ‘Narrative space’. The concept of space was a concrete and stable phenomenon in the nineteenth century realist fiction, later in modernist fiction it is filtered through the perceptions of protagonists, and in postmodernist fiction we observe that different spaces multiply and merge. Space is usually associated with static description which slows up and intrudes into the

narrative discourse. Spatial relationships in a narrative are useful as it enables readers to visualize its contents. “We can conceive of plot as a metaphorical network of paths, which either converge or diverge, of goals which are either reached or blocked” (Bridgeman 55). That is, our image of a work can involve the paths of the protagonists in their fictional world, bringing together time and space to shape a plot. The scope of the narrative world adds strongly to the effects of the texts as clearly seen in. The spatial aspects play a crucial role in keeping track of what is going on, especially in narratives with multiple plot-lines. Another area of importance is the position of the reader in the narrative world. It so happens that while reading fiction, the reader conceptually exchanges his reader-centered position with that of the locations in the story world. To be precise, when seen through the eyes of the protagonists, his or her location becomes the centre of experience. Even our emotional experience of the narrative has temporal and spatial dimensions- the very instance of empathizing with the protagonist.

T.D. Ramakrishnan’s *Francis Itty Cora* with its imaginative theme and innovative narrative structure, offers a unique experience to its readers. Though the novel revolves round the “Itty Cora myth”, it incorporates multiple discourses on topics like the Hypatian School, Iraq war, sex, cannibalism, history and various theories of mathematics, famous painters and their paintings, international politics, terrorism, Christianity, religion and so on. The manner in which the author has connected these diverse elements to the main Itty Cora myth maintains an intense curiosity throughout the reading process.

The narrative’s exposition familiarizes its readers with Xavier Fernando Itty Cora, a US citizen, seeking a remedy for his sexual impotency over the internet. His search leads him to “The school” and eventually acquaints him with Rekha, the principal of a school that teaches the art of love making. Itty Cora begins to unfurl his life and the whole narration comes to us through a series of Internet chat transcripts and emails. His experiences are weird and

disturbing and Rekha learns that Cora is a cannibal. He descends from the family of Francis Itty Cora, a 15th century pepper merchant from Kunnankulam, Kerala, who had settled in Florence, Italy. Cora assigns Rekha to find out more about his ancestral details and this provides an investigative outlook to the novel. So on one side we have the efforts of Rekha and her circle of acquaintances (Bindu, Reshmi, Benny, the Novelist etc) influencing the reader's imagination and on the other, we have the emails of Itty Cora exposing his adventures in various parts of the world. These simultaneous plots within the novel arouse the curiosity of the reader.

As Bakhtin contends, a novel often renders in an artistic way the interconnectedness of space and time, and that is what he calls 'Chronotype' (recurring, structural features of a narrative). *Francis Itty Cora* alternates between the experiences of Itty Cora and the investigation and various encounters of Rekha as well as her colleagues. We come to know that there exists a set of eighteen families spread over the world, who are direct descendants of Francis Ittykora, and some of them still live in Kunnankulam, Kerala. The Cora family has some bizarre customs and rituals which they follow secretly, and they have certain ancient books and manuscripts with them, never seen by anyone outside the family. This Cora myth recurs throughout the novel, even in the last chapter, when it is published in the newspaper. Meanwhile, Cora who is trying out various methods to revive himself ends up in Peru, and later comes in contact with Hashimoto Morigami, a mathematics researcher. She too is interested in Francis Itty Cora and has already collected some information from various sources, and wants to get one of those secret family books to continue her research on 'The Kerala school of Mathematics'. Thus we find that the readers are either reading the chat transcripts or emails of Xavier Itty Cora; the blog entries of Morigami on Francis Itty Cora; the pages of a moth-eaten old book about Francis Itty Cora which someone had written during early 20th century (the author of the book-B.Poranchu B.A- was murdered); writings on palm leaves; the news

that is telecasted on television; an article in the newspaper: all contributing to the central Itty Cora myth. The narrative discourse of *Francis Itty Cora* is thus a collage due to the multiple narrative modes employed. As Abbott puts it:

We never see a story directly, but instead always pick it up through the narrative discourse. The story is always mediated –by a voice, a style of writing . . .so that what we call the story is really something that we construct. We put it together from what we read or see, often by inference. (17)

Each chapter begins with a quotation which reflects the theme of the chapter. The words of Umberto Eco, Ernest Hemingway, Noam Chomsky etc find place in the text through these introductory phrases at the onset of each chapter. For example, the novelist uses the words of Dr. Ernst Straus when he is about to deal with Pal Erdos in the Chapter: ‘N is a Number’. He quotes “In our century, in which mathematics is so strongly dominated by ‘theory doctors’ he has remained the prince of Problem solvers and the absolute monarch of problem posers”(qtd in *Itty Cora* 182). This formula goes on till the last chapter titled ‘Itty Cora Shot Dead!’ where he quotes Charles Baudelaire and this is indicative of the predicament of the Itty Cora Myth.

O bitter is the knowledge that one draws from the voyage!

The monotonous and tiny world, today

Yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our reflections,

An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom! (qtd in *Itty Cora* 299)

T.D. Ramakrishnan interweaves several biographies and historical events in the diegesis of the novel. We come across Hypatia of Alexandria, Tupac Amaru (Last Inca king), Amaru Shakur (the American Rap singer), a discussion on Nabanita Dev Sen’s story “Stand back, Please, It’s the Nobel” (first wife of Amartya Sen), Akiko Morigami (Japanese tennis

player), Iraq War, Saddam Hussain, Donald Rumsfeld, Mathematicians like Pal Erdos, Alexander Grothendeick, Fermat and his Theorem, Painters like Raphael, Michael Angelo, and so on. The novel is thus suffused with information and this intertextuality triggers anxiety and surprise in the reader. And the technique with which the author has skillfully assembled various real incidents and people in this story gives it a socio-political outlook. Supplemented by such an atmosphere, we feel that a person called Francis Itty Cora really existed and that his name was purposefully removed from all our metanarratives. But the author claims that the novel is not history and is just an attempt to create a story by weaving historical incidents and fiction. Apart from these, the influence of Itty Cora and the 'Hypatian School' on the 15th century Mathematicians of Kerala, detailed descriptions of the cannibal feast and the initiation of Morigami into the cannibal club, an unusual interpretation of paintings by Michael Angelo, Raphael (we are reminded of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*) are brought into the text without destroying the coherence of the novel. The structure is non-linear with multiple intradiegetic narrators -Xavier Itty Cora, Rekha, the novelist within the novel, Morigami etc. Just like the clicking various links on a webpage, the narrators take us from one event happening in one part of the world to another event happening in another part of the world. The existence of a character called 'novelist' within the novel proves helpful in wrapping the novel since he is let free just because he is a novelist and is known in the society, while another character Bindu is killed. The suspense revolving round the investigation carried out by the three ladies comes to an end as Bindu and the novelist are caught and punished for intruding into the secrets of the Cora Family but it still leaves the reader curious about -what next? The suspense centered on the arrival of Xavier Itty Cora to Kerala too comes to a halt when he is murdered at the airport. All that remains is an ironical comment on: the government's policies under such circumstances, the usual catastrophe: Lashkar-e-Taiba, a terrorist organization taking up the responsibility of the attack on Itty Cora; the response of the press, the way in

which everything is twisted and reported benefitting the Cora family; the arrest of Morigami when she tries to expose the truth. The novelist within the novel narrates all these as he witnesses it on the television. This ironical denouement leaves the reader thinking about the Cora Myth and its reliability. As Sternberg defines, narrativity is thus “the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between the represented and communicated time” (qtd. in Bridgeman 54). Interestingly, T.D Ramakrishnan’s *Francis Itty Cora* with all the paraphernalia of a postmodern fiction emerges successful in arresting its readers within the temporal and spatial structures of the novel. Thus, disrupting the much revered unities of place and time, T.D Ramakrishnan takes his readers around the world and across centuries with *Francis Itty Cora*

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